

Sugar Cane and Coffee in Puerto Rico, III

469

The Struggle of the Landless Proletariat Against the Sugar Monopoly

By RAYMOND E. CRIST

VIII

TO RECAPITULATE, the rapid development of the coffee industry during the nineteenth century was paralleled by the decline in the production of sugar, for various reasons: capital and credit were scarce, agricultural techniques were not improved, disease decreased the yields, slave labor was inefficient, and for some years after the abolition of slavery cheap free labor was hard to obtain, and the transportation net was very poor. In other words, after three hundred years of emphasis and aid directed toward the sugar industry, sugar was outstripped by the newcomer, coffee. American control of the island, after 1898, saw the beginning of the concentration of land in the hands of sugar growers, who profited from the American tariff system. Since the United States tariff was designed to protect from foreign competition products grown or manufactured on the mainland, sugar and tobacco, produced in Puerto Rico as well as in the United States, benefited from the tariff. Coffee, not produced on the mainland, did not receive tariff protection. Thus the gradual decline of the coffee industry has been concomitant with the process of concentration of land in the hands of the sugar growers and with the emphasis on monoculture.

But even at present, when the outlook for the coffee industry is still gloomy, there is a large acreage planted to that crop. Since coffee raising has traditionally, and of necessity,

been in the hands of relatively small independent farmers, protection would have meant more money in the pockets not only of the growers but of the workers too, with consequent improvement upon the cultural landscape. The tobacco growers—also relatively small independent farmers, whose industry has always enjoyed protection, have made of the tobacco growing areas the most prosperous and most smiling agricultural sectors of the island. Therefore it would appear to be going somewhat far afield to blame hurricanes, loss of the Spanish market, erosion, diminishing yields, and so forth, for the gradual decline of the coffee industry, when the real cause has been the lack of assurance, since 1898, of a fair price per pound for every pound of Puerto Rican coffee produced.

Thus, the same island on which coffee was the chief export crop in the nineties, fifty years later was forced to import coffee to meet the domestic demands, whereas sugar plantations, that were being converted into cattle ranches at the time of the American Intervention, soon became profitable as sugar producers again, under the preferential tariff. But the monopoly of land grew so overwhelming in this bonanza industry that the great mass of the people were filled with a despairing sense of injustice and frustration, ready to follow any leader that promised speedy relief. It was not a question of the more abundant life, but a problem of sheerest animal survival, and the island-wide dissatisfaction engendered in the struggle supplied the major impetus to the enforcement of the 500 acre law against the corporations.

In the war against Spain in 1898 the United States occupied Cuba and Puerto Rico. Soon after the war Cuba was granted her sovereignty and became an autonomous republic. Puerto Rico, for strategic purposes, continued to be held by the United States with the political status, since 1900, of a U. S.

Possession. But economically the island was always an integral part of the United States. Capital from the mainland made itself at home on the island, particularly in the sugar business. There was an emphasis on cane to the neglect of coffee. The profits from cane were in large part siphoned off to the states instead of being ploughed back into the island. The three largest absentee companies left in Puerto Rico only one-fourth of their profits of \$81,000,000 in the 1920-1935 period.²¹

There is a crying need for higher capital investment, rationalization, and complete technical re-equipment in every phase of activity on the island, save in the sugar industry alone. But withal the modern technological processes that have been introduced into the sugar mill, the landless day laborer in the cane field remains in the hoe and oxcart and machete stage of development, and he is paid according to the standards of pre-industrial society. The high-salaried sugar chemist in the mill sits in the rarefied atmosphere of economic Olympian heights, far removed from the low-wage cane cutter grubbing away in the stifling humid air on the earth below; for the vigilance of the chemist saves the company his yearly salary many times over, but the efficiency of a man with a hoe and a machete merits only the poorest remuneration. Although it may well be true that the cash income from a single acre planted in cane is equal to the income that could be derived from as many as four to twelve acres planted in food crops, nevertheless the advantage is of little practical benefit to the mass of poorly nourished Puerto Ricans, who have little share in the sugar income. If mechanization is introduced all along the line, and if workers are freed from endemic diseases and are enabled to obtain a balanced diet, per capita production for those employed will increase and

²¹ Clarence Senior, "Self-Determination for Puerto Rico," New York, 1946, p. 12.

wages can rise; more food and social services can be purchased, island-wide production and well-being will increase in an upward spiral. How can the worker get a better diet, which would help step up efficiency? They must either grow more food or import more; since sugar has preëmpted most of the good land on which the growing of foodstuffs would have been possible, it would seem logical and necessary to import more food. But how can Puerto Rican workers continue, with their present miserable wages, to buy food in the market of continental United States, in competition with workers earning five to ten times as much? Yet as long as the sugar interests can survive only behind the U.S. tariff wall, so surely will the Puerto Rican laborer be forced to pay American prices for consumers' goods, instead of bidding freely on the world market for cheaper produce. Thanks to these restrictions, some \$5,000,000 per year is added to the cost of rice, mainstay of the Puerto Rican diet, and from 10 to 35 per cent is added to the cost of shoes, which are an essential in tropical Puerto Rico to the prevention and control of hookworm. To be sure, some students of the situation maintain that the benefits of the sugar tariff far outweigh the added costs of the imported necessities. Be that as it may, it is still apparent to even the most casual observer that Puerto Rican workers have been ground extremely fine between the upper and the nether millstones, that is, between metropolitan industrial prices and colonial preindustrial wages. Confronted with this impasse, a substantial number of Puerto Rican leaders have lost the belief in the capacity of the sugar industry to regulate itself.

Muñoz Marín, brilliant writer and speaker, and the ablest political thinker in the Caribbean, together with Rexford Tugwell, Governor and conscientious student of the Island's problems, worked together in organizing a Development

Bank and an Agricultural Development Company, with the hope that thereby would be provided the new capital and the new techniques that hitherto, under the long regime of government subvention to sugar, masquerading as *laissez-faire*, has failed to be forthcoming. These leaders have at last, in the words of Carlyle, "articulated the dumb, deep want of the people", and in response an aroused insular government is backing hydro-electric development and vocational education, industrial expansion and the redistribution of land. These undertakings will inevitably affect the lot of the long-forgotten man in Puerto Rico.

The close of the war brought far-reaching economic consequences for Puerto Rico; pay checks to the home folks from those in the service dwindled and ceased, the fifty-two-twenty clubs lost numbers and rum revenues will decrease as soon as whiskey is again distilled in the States. Appropriations for military and federal construction on the island are already smaller. The New Deal was swept into the dustbin by the voters in the United States in the November, 1946, elections. Is it ended for Puerto Rico? Does the end of the New Deal in the United States mean that the Good Neighbor Policy is over too, or is it perhaps in any case not necessary to be neighborly with members of our own political family? Is Puerto Rico a member? Perhaps the Republicans will want to get back to normalcy: will they consider it normal to ask their constituents to pay two or three cents more a pound for Puerto Rican sugar than they would have to pay for Cuban sugar if it came in tariff-free? Perhaps both the constituents and the Cubans will have ideas on normalcy. Will the United States graciously grant Puerto Rico independence—immediate or gradual—as it did the Philippines, now that we can grow a lot of our own sugar behind our tariff wall—and import the remainder more cheaply from

non-U.S. possessions? Will Washington want to continue pumping tens of millions of federal dollars into Puerto Rico each year? But can official Washington ever afford to siphon off the reservoir of good will built up on the island by Franklin Roosevelt, who was loved by the great mass of Puerto Ricans as they loved no other continental American? Can any party in power in Washington afford *not* to solve the Puerto Rican problem by indefinitely adjourning the day when the entire population, enlightened by a prolonged educational campaign in the movies, over the radio and in the press, may hold a plebiscite, and thus democratically determine their political status?

As far as the Puerto Ricans are concerned, it would seem that the key to the question of political status is held by Muñoz Marín, so long as he retains his present hold. The common people generally are in a good bargaining position when they are led by a man of the calibre of Muñoz Marín, wise in the ways of men, whole-hearted in his struggle to obtain better living conditions for his people, sincerely indifferent to the traditional opportunities for enriching himself in office—this scion of a great patriot and idealist comes naturally by his clear vision and his unshakeable belief in the dignity of every human being. Under his guidance, the ballot in the hands of the landless has proved a powerful weapon.

The sugar industry—which Muñoz Marín is reported to have compared to a cow, fed by the Government and milked by the big corporations—long made huge profits for a small number, but such a state of affairs could not continue forever, for it was the very system of monopoly of the land for the use of a single crop that created the landless proletariat, and therewith planted the seeds of its own destruction.

*University of Maryland,
College Park, Md.*